German professor promotes World War I military figures as models

Sven Heymanns
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On August 3, a remarkable commentary by political scientist Ralph Rotte appeared in the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Under the headline, "[Baron von] Richthofen instead of Rommel," the professor for international relations at RWTH Aachen University advocates that the supposed war heroes of the German Reichswehr (Imperial Armed Forces) in World War I provide the tradition to follow for today's Bundeswehr (Federal Armed Forces).

Rotte's starting point is the scandal around the right-wing Bundeswehr first lieutenant Franco A., who, as part of a neo-Nazi network within the army, planned terrorist attacks on high-ranking politicians in order to have them blamed on refugees. After defence minister Ursula von der Leyen had declared that the Wehrmacht (Hitler's armed forces) could not serve as a historical model for the Bundeswehr, she encountered harsh criticism from high-ranking Bundeswehr generals and numerous media outlets.

Rotte's commentary makes clear the real content of this "debate over traditions" within the ruling class: More than 70 years after the end of the Nazi regime, which turned Europe and half the world into ruins and killed untold millions, the prerequisites for a return to an independent German world policy are to be created again. The promotion of supposed war heroes of the past serves both to trivialize previous imperialist crimes and the public ideological preparation of new atrocities, including among the soldiers who are to commit them.

According to Rotte, the core problem lies in the fact that for decades, a completely wrong image of the Bundeswehr was created in the public mind, which also had a lasting impact on the self-perception of the soldiers. "The image of the soldier in the Federal Republic [of Germany] was systematically separated from the phenomenon of war," the professor complains. The public perception of the Bundeswehr had "focused not on its ability to fight, but on its social, humanitarian and economically relevant functions." Rotte described the fact—"the danger of injury and death, as well as the possibility of having to fight and kill had gradually disappeared from the public memory"—as a "fatal step."

Rotte's plea is clear: For its future wars, the Bundeswehr needs suitable historical models in leading, fighting, killing and dying. In contrast to the Potsdam military historian Sönke Neitzel, Rotte is less likely to invoke the Bundeswehr's Wehrmacht traditions, since these are "problematic" given the criminal nature of World War II. Instead, he pleads for the glorification of the German military that caused the death of countless people in World War I.

In particular, Rotte cited major general Max Hoffmann, "who pursued relatively moderate war as a wilful chief of staff in the High Command East 1914 to 1918, who acted as a brilliant operative head behind the notorious duo of Hindenburg and Ludendorff."

If one takes a closer look at the real role of Max Hoffmann, Professor Rotte's intention is clear: As the "brilliant operative head" behind the Supreme Army Command (OHL) of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, the professor is seeking to rehabilitate one of the biggest criminals in the service of German militarism who can be found in World War I.

Hoffmann is regarded as the real organiser of numerous battles on the Eastern Front, whose successes have been attributed above all to the two leaders of the OHL in public propaganda. These include the Battle of Gumbinnen (over 30,000 casualties on both sides), the Battle of Tannenberg (around 35,000 casualties on both sides and 95,000 Russian prisoners of war) and the Battle of the Masurian Lakes (approximately 165,000

dead and wounded in total). In his own memoirs, Hoffmann wrote disparagingly about Hindenburg: “The fellow is a too sad comrade, this great military commander and idol of the people. ... A man has never become so famous with so little of his own intellectual and physical exertion.”

Hoffmann himself made great efforts to advance the expansion of German imperialism to the east. His allegedly “moderate” war aims were not to extend the sphere of influence of the German Reich in Eastern Europe primarily through open annexations, but by the creation of satellite states, which were to depend entirely on Berlin.

In the peace talks at Brest-Litovsk in early 1918, he aggressively argued that the Soviet delegation of Adolph Joffe and Leon Trotsky had no right to vote on the fate of the territories in which German troops were stationed. In February 1918, German troops entered the Ukraine and took away the most important sources of coal and grain from the young Soviet government.

But Hoffmann’s plans went even further. The Crimea—according to him, the “German Riviera”—should be annexed directly by the German Reich and serve as a starting point for ensuring further German influence over the Black Sea up to the Caucasus and the Middle East. In the 1920s, he and the potash industrialist Arnold Rechberg developed the so-called “Hoffmann Plan,” which called for a German attack on the Soviet Union, together with Britain and France, to overthrow the Bolsheviks.

Given such plans, two questions inevitably arise: If today, a German professor calls these war aims “moderate,” what are to be considered farther-reaching war aims? And if a general who called for the expansion of the German Reich as far as the Caucasus and the Middle East is to be a model for the Bundeswehr, what are the military perspectives of today’s Bundeswehr? The self-assertiveness with which Rotte proposes major general Hoffmann as a model for the Bundeswehr today provides a terrifying glimpse at what kind of military plans are already being discussed again as practicable in leading circles.

Major general Hoffmann is not the only World War I soldier who Rotte wants to make a role model for the Bundeswehr. In addition to Vice-Admiral Maximilian Imperial Count von Spee, who conducted a futile battle with British units before the Falkland Islands, and was sunk along with more than 2,200 other German marines, Rotte also raised the “Red Baron” Manfred von Richthofen as an example. The fighter pilot was known for the fact that he shot down the most enemy aircraft of all the belligerent states in World War I.

Rotte’s contribution to the debate over the traditions of the Bundeswehr is a serious warning. It shows how the trivialization and glorification of German crimes in both world wars has now become commonplace among German professors.

At Humboldt University in Berlin, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) have shown how professors Herfried Münkler and Jörg Baberowski play down and justify the crimes of German imperialism in World Wars I and II. Both have close links to the highest political and military circles. Rotte’s contribution emphasises that this development is not confined to Humboldt University but the entire academic milieu. As before the First and Second World Wars, German professors are once again playing a decisive role in providing the ideological justification for new wars and crimes.